The French Revolution

EPISD World History Team

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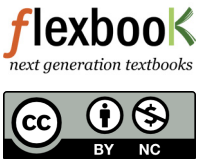

AUTHOR

EPISD World History Team

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CHAPTER 1

The French Revolution

FIGURE 1.1

Student Learning Objectives

At the end of this section the student will be able to

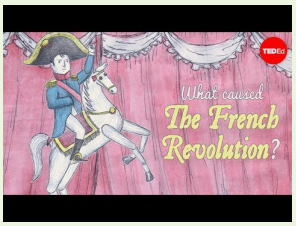
- Compare the causes, characteristics, and consequences of the American and French revolutions, emphasizing the role of the Enlightenment, the Glorious Revolution, and religion. [WHS.9A]
- Explain the impact of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Napoleonic Wars on Europe and Latin America. [WHS.9B]
- Trace the influence of the American and French revolutions of Latin America, including the role of Simon Bolivar [WHS.9C]
- Locate places and regions of historical significance directly related to major eras and turning points in world history. [WHS.16A]

- Identify the impact of political and legal ideas contained in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. [WHS.20B]
- Describe how people have participated in supporting or changing their governments. [WHS.21A]

The French Revolution

Only eight years after the end of the American Revolution, an even more significant and bloody revolution would break out in France. By the time the dust had settled, the **French Revolution** and the successive events it gave birth too would bring about significant changes to not only France, but to the rest of the European continent and beyond. The revolution and the events that soon followed would abolish serfdom and feudal privileges, create a uniform system of local government, lay the groundwork for a national education system, generate a new legal code, abolish slavery in the colonies, and establish a standardized metric system. The ideal, if not the practice, of constitutional government would been rooted in the French mind. Most importantly, the seeds of liberalism, constitutionalism, and democracy had been sewn. The most striking result of the Revolution in its own time was its violent disturbance of old orders; from Ireland to Poland, nothing would ever be the same again.

What caused the French Revolution? by TED Ed



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The Old Regime

Toward the end of the 18th century, years of feudal oppression and fiscal mismanagement contributed to a French society that was ripe for revolt. The **Old Regime** in France was the system of feudalism left over from the Middle Ages. It was divided into three classes or "estates." The **First Estate** was the clergy, consisting of priests and Church officials. It owned about 10% of the land in France and contributed about 2% of its income to the government. The **Second Estate** was the nobility. The nobles held many special privileges, such as being exempt from many taxes and having the right to collect feudal dues. Nobles also served as officers in the army and held high positions at court. Though the Second Estate only made up about 2% of the population it owned 20% of the land.

The **Third Estate**, was the largest of the three estates, making up about 98% of the French population. The three groups that made up this estate differed greatly in their economic conditions.

The first group - the bourgeoisie - were merchants and artisans. They were well-educated and believed strongly in the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. Although some of the bourgeoisie were as rich as nobles, they paid high taxes and lacked privileges of the Second Estate. Many felt that their wealth entitle them to a greater degree of social status and political power.

The workers of France's cities - cooks, servants, and others - formed the second group within the Third Estate, a group poorer than the bourgeoisie. The poor of France's cities often went hungry. Most of Paris' poor people ate three pounds of bread a day and very little else. If the cost of bread rose, hungry mobs attacked carts of grain and bread to steal what they needed. In 1788, grain harvests were small. The price of bread doubled. Thus, the sans-culottes, as France's city workers were called, were in a dangerous mood in the spring of 1789.

Peasants formed the largest group within the Third Estate - more than 80% of France's 26 million people. Peasants paid about half their income in dues to nobles, tithes to the church, and taxes to the king's agents. They even paid taxes on such basic staples a salt. Peasants joined the urban poor in resenting the clergy and the nobles for their privileges and special treatment. Collectively, therefore, each of the heavily taxed and discontented groups within the Third Estate were eager for change.

FIGURE 1.2

The Three Estates of France: "You should hope that this game will be over soon." The Third Estate carrying the Clergy and the Nobility on its back

Enlightenment ideas made many Frenchmen unwilling to accept the divine right of kings and the privileged position of the Church and nobility. The success of the American Revolution inspired them, and they discussed the radical ideas of Rousseau and Voltaire.

Against this backdrop,France's once prosperous economy was failing. The population was expanding rapidly, as were trade and production. However, the heavy burden of taxes made it impossible to conduct business profitably within France. The cost of living rose for everyone. In addition, bad weather in the 1780's caused widespread crop failures, resulting in a severe shortage of grain, and many people faced starvation.

During this period,France's government sank deeply into debt. Extravagant spending by the king and queen was part of the problem. **Louis XVI**, who became king in 1774, inherited part of the debt from his predecessors. He also borrowed heavily in order to help the American revolutionaries in their war against Great Britain-France's chief rival - thereby nearly doubling the government's debt. When bankers in 1786 refused to lend the government any more money, Louis faced serious problems.

Unfortunately, Louis XVI was a weak and indecisive leader who allowed matters to drift. He paid little attention to the details of governing and preferred to hunt and tinker with locks. His wife, Marie Antoinette was unpopular

and became known as Madame Deficit because of her extravagant purchases of gowns, jewels and gifts. Rather than cutting expenses and increasing taxes, Louis put off dealing with the emergency until France faced bankruptcy.

FIGURE 1.3
Antoine-François Callet: Louis XVI

The Estates-General

In an act of desperation, Louis XVI decided in 1789 to convene the Estates-General, an ancient assembly consisting of three different estates that each represented a portion of the French population. If the Estates-General could agree on a tax solution, it would be implemented. However, since two of the three estates—the clergy and the nobility—were tax-exempt, the attainment of any such solution was unlikely.

Moreover, the outdated rules of order for the Estates-General gave each estate a single vote, despite the fact that the Third Estate—consisting of the general French public—was many times larger than either of the first two. Feuds quickly broke out over this disparity and would prove to be irreconcilable. Realizing that its numbers gave it an automatic advantage, the Third Estate declared itself the sovereign National Assembly. Within days of the announcement, many members of the other two estates had switched allegiances over to this revolutionary new assembly.

The Bastille and the Great Fear

Shortly after the National Assembly formed, its members took the Tennis Court Oath, swearing that they would not relent in their efforts until a new constitution had been agreed upon. The **National Assembly**'s revolutionary spirit galvanized France, manifesting in a number of different ways. In Paris, citizens stormed the city's largest prison, the Bastille, in pursuit of arms. In the countryside, peasants and farmers revolted against their feudal contracts by attacking the manors and estates of their landlords. Dubbed the "Great Fear," these rural attacks continued until the early August issuing of the August Decrees, which freed those peasants from their oppressive contracts. Shortly thereafter, the assembly released the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen**, which established a proper judicial code and the autonomy of the French people. Reflecting the influence of Enlightenment ideas and of the Declaration of Independence, the document state that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights" and that "the aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural. . . .rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." Other articles of the famous document guaranteed citizens equal justice, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. **"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"** became the slogan of the Revolution.

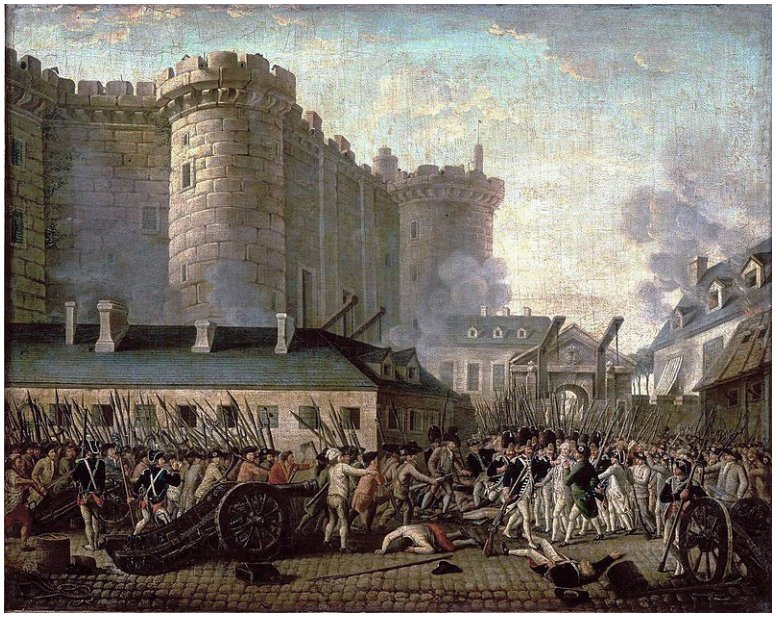


FIGURE 1.4

The Storming of the Bastille, July 14, 1789

Rifts in the Assembly

Though the National Assembly did succeed in drafting a constitution, the relative peace of the moment was short-lived. A rift slowly grew between the radical and moderate assembly members, while the common laborers and workers began to feel overlooked. Meanwhile, Louis and his family tried to escape from France to the Austrian Netherlands but were caught. Returned to Paris under armed guard, Louis' attempted escape only served to increase the influence of his radical enemies, sealing his own doom. The assembly became especially divided. The moderate Girondins took a stance in favor of retaining the constitutional monarchy, while the radical Jacobins wanted the king completely out of the picture.

Outside of France, some neighboring countries feared that France's revolutionary spirit would spread beyond French land. In response, they issued the Declaration of Pillnitz, which insisted that the French return Louis XVI to the throne. French leaders interpreted the declaration as hostile, so the Girondin-led assembly declared war on Austria and Prussia.

The Reign of Terror

The first acts of the newly named National Convention were the abolition of the monarchy and the declaration of France as a republic. In January 1793, the convention tried and executed Louis XVI on the grounds of treason. Despite the creation of the **Committee of Public Safety**, the war with Austria and Prussia went poorly for France, and foreign forces pressed on into French territory. Enraged citizens overthrew the Girondin-led National Convention, and the Jacobins, led by **Maximilien Robespierre**, took control.

Backed by the newly approved Constitution of 1793, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety began conscripting French soldiers and implementing laws to stabilize the economy. For a time, it seemed thatFrance's fortunes might be changing. But Robespierre, growing increasingly paranoid about counterrevolutionary influences, embarked upon a **Reign of Terror** in late 1793-1794, during which he had more than 15,000 people executed at the guillotine. When the French army successfully removed foreign invaders and the economy finally stabilized, however, Robespierre no longer had any justification for his extreme actions, and he himself was arrested in July 1794 and executed.

The Thermidorian Reaction and the Directory

The era following the ousting of Robespierre was known as the Thermidorian Reaction, and a period of governmental restructuring began, leading to the new Constitution of 1795 and a significantly more conservative National Convention. To control executive responsibilities and appointments, a group known as the Directory was formed. Though it had no legislative abilities, the Directory's abuse of power soon came to rival that of any of the tyrannous revolutionaries France had faced.

Napoleon

Meanwhile, the Committee of Public Safety's war effort was realizing unimaginable success. French armies, especially those led by young general **Napoleon Bonaparte**, were making progress in nearly every direction. Napoleon's forces drove throughItaly and reached as far as Egypt before facing a deflating defeat. In the face of this rout, and having received word of political upheavals in France, Napoleon returned to Paris. He arrived in time to lead a coup against the Directory in 1799, eventually stepping up and naming himself "first consul"—effectively, the leader of France. With Napoleon at the helm, the Revolution ended, and France entered a fifteen-year period of military rule.

Napoleon worked to restore stability to post-revolutionary France. He centralized the government; instituted reforms in such areas as banking and education; supported science and the arts; and sought to improve relations between his regime and the pope (who represented France's main religion, Catholicism), which had suffered during the revolution. One of his most significant accomplishments was the Napoleonic Code, which streamlined the French legal system and continues to form the foundation of French civil law to this day.

In 1802, a constitutional amendment made Napoleon first consul for life. Two years later, in 1804, he crowned himself emperor of France in a lavish ceremony at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.

From 1803 to 1815, France was engaged in the **Napoleonic Wars**, a series of major conflicts with various coalitions of European nations. In 1803, partly as a means to raise funds for future wars, Napoleon sold France's Louisiana Territory in North America to the newly independent United States for $15 million, a transaction that later became known as the **Louisiana Purchase**.

In October 1805, the British wiped out Napoleon's fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar. However, in December of that same year, Napoleon achieved what is considered to be one of his greatest victories at the Battle of Austerlitz, in which his army defeated the Austrians and Russians. The victory resulted in the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and the creation of the Confederation of the Rhine.

Beginning in 1806, Napoleon sought to wage large-scale economic warfare against Britain with the establishment of

the so-called Continental System of European port blockades against British trade. In 1807, following Napoleon's defeat of the Russians at Friedland in Prussia, Alexander I (1777-1825) was forced to sign a peace settlement, the Treaty of Tilsit. In 1809, the French defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Wagram, resulting in further gains for Napoleon. During these years, Napoleon reestablished a French aristocracy (eliminated in the French Revolution) and began handing out titles of nobility to his loyal friends and family as his empire continued to expand across much of western and central continental Europe.

Napoleon's Downfall and First Abdication

In 1810, Russia withdrew from the Continental System. In retaliation, Napoleon led a massive army into Russiain the summer of 1812. Rather than engaging the French in a full-scale battle, the Russians adopted a "scorched-earth" strategy of retreating whenever Napoleon's forces attempted to attack. As a result, Napoleon's troops trekked deeper into Russia despite being ill-prepared for an extended campaign. In September, both sides suffered heavy casualties in the indecisive Battle of Borodino. Napoleon's forces marched on to Moscow, only to discover almost the entire population evacuated. Retreating Russians set fires across the city in an effort to deprive enemy troops of supplies. After waiting a month for a surrender that never came, Napoleon, faced with the onset of the Russian winter, was forced to order his starving, exhausted army out of Moscow. During the disastrous retreat, his army suffered continual harassment from a suddenly aggressive and merciless Russian army. Of Napoleon's 600,000 troops who began the campaign, only an estimated 100,000 made it out of Russia.

At the same time as the catastrophic Russian invasion, French forces were engaged in the **Peninsular War** (1808-1814), brought about by Napoleon's attempt to put his brother which resulted in the Spanish and Portuguese, with assistance from the British, driving the French from the Iberian Peninsula. This loss was followed in 1813 by the Battle of Leipzig, also known as the Battle of Nations, in which Napoleon's forces were defeated by a coalition that included Austrian, Prussian, Russian and Swedish troops. Napoleon then retreated to France, and in March 1814 coalition forces captured Paris.

On April 6, 1814, Napoleon, then in his mid-40s, was forced to abdicate the throne. With the Treaty of Fontainebleau, he was exiled to Elba, a Mediterranean island off the coast of Italy. He was given sovereignty over the small island, while his wife and son went to Austria.

Hundred Days Campaign and Battle of Waterloo

On February 26, 1815, after less than a year in exile, Napoleon escapedElbaand sailed to the French mainland with a group of more than 1,000 supporters. On March 20, he returned toParis, where he was welcomed by cheering crowds. The new king, Louis XVIII (1755-1824), fled, and Napoleon began what came to be known as his Hundred Days campaign.

Upon Napoleon's return to France, a coalition of allies-the Austrians, British, Prussians and Russians-who considered the French emperor an enemy began to prepare for war. Napoleon raised a new army and planned to strike preemptively, defeating the allied forces one by one before they could launch a united attack against him.

In June 1815, his forces invaded Belgium, where British and Prussian troops were stationed. On June 16, Napoleon's troops defeated the Prussians at the Battle of Ligny. However, two days later, on June 18, at the **Battle of Waterloo** near Brussels, the French were crushed by the British, with assistance from the Prussians. On June 22, 1815, Napoleon was once again forced to abdicate. In October 1815, Napoleon was exiled to the remote, British-held island of Saint Helena, in the South Atlantic Ocean. He died there onMay 5, 1821, at age 51, most likely from stomach cancer.

Without a doubt, Napoleon was a military genius and a brilliant administrator. Yet all his victories must be measured against the millions of lives that were lost in his wars. Of his many achievements, only his aw code and some of his reforms in France's government proved lasting - and they were not won on the battlefield. A later French statesman and writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, summed up Napoleon's character by saying, "he was as great as a man can be without virtue." Napoleon's defeat opened the door for the freed European countries to establish a new order.

The Congress of Vienna

After Napoleon's first defeat in 1814, leaders of many nations met for months. They tried to draw up a peace plan for Europe that would last many years. They called the meeting the **Congress of Vienna**. The key person there was the foreign minister of Austria, Klemens von Metternich. He shaped the peace conditions that were eventually accepted.

Metternich insisted on three goals. First, he wanted to make sure that the French would not attack another country again. Second, he wanted a **balance of power** in which no one nation was too strong. Third, he wanted to put kings back in charge of the countries from which they had been removed. The leaders agreed with Metternich's ideas. An age of European peace began.

AcrossEurope, kings and princes reclaimed their thrones. Most of them were conservatives and did not encourage individual liberties. They did not want any calls for equal rights. However, many people still believed in the ideals of the French Revolution. They thought that all people should be equal and share in power. Later, they would fight for these rights again.

The French Revolution had ignited the spirit of **nationalism** throughout much of Europe by teaching that each government should be based on the will of the people. Nationalism is the belief that each nationality or ethnic group is entitled to its own government and national homeland. Napoleon's conquests also inspired nationalist resentment against the French. Despite the stirrings of nationalism, the statesmen at the Congress of Vienna failed to take into account the desire of many people to control their own governments. Instead, they favored maintaining traditional rulers. As a result, many European peoples were still not united, while other continued to live under foreign rule.

Comparing the American and French Revolutions

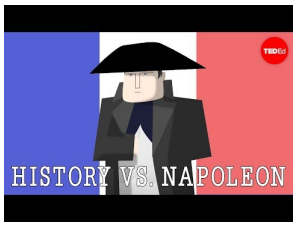
In some ways the French Revolution was remarkably similar to the American. Both revolutions applied principles of the Enlightenment; both swept away traditional systems; both followed similar-stage courses, moving from moderate to radical before a final conservative swing; and both helped set in motion modern constitutional government, along with democracy and nationalism. There were, however, striking differences. Unlike the American colonies,Francehad a classic Old Regime, with aristocratic privilege and monarchy. Instead of being far removed from the centers of civilization, it was the most populous and cultured state of Western Europe. Its revolution, therefore, was more violent and more decisive.

The French Revolution, as evidenced by the Napoleonic dictatorship which it produced, was an immediate failure; for France at the turn of the nineteenth century, had secured neither liberty, nor equality, nor fraternity. Except for certain prosperous members of the middle classes, the French economy promised less for most people in 1796 than it had two decades earlier. Most discouraging was the realization that the Revolution had betrayed its own ideals, leaving the French people cynical and disillusioned.

The Revolution, nevertheless, had brought great changes. It had abolished serfdom and feudal privileges, created a uniform system of local government, laid the groundwork for a national education system, started legal reforms that would culminate in the great Napoleonic Code, abolished slavery in the colonies, and established the standardized metric system. The ideal, if not the practice, of constitutional government had been rooted in the French mind. Moreover, French armies, even before 1800, had scattered abroad the seeds of liberalism, constitutionalism, and even democracy. The most striking result of the Revolution in its own time was its violent disturbance of old orders; from Ireland to Poland, nothing would ever be the same again. The effects of the French Revolution would also soon be felt in the Americas.

Video Assignment

Watch: History vs. Napoleon by TED Ed



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Watch: The French Revolution By Crash Course

1. How did the French Revolution change human history more than the American Revolution?
2. What was the meeting of the Estates General? and why did Louis XVI call one?
3. Describe the three Estates.
4. What is a guillotine?

Interactive Student Notebook Assignment

1. Research the Declaration of Rights of Man, how was it similar and different to the Declaration of Independence?

Review Questions

1. How did disputes over tax policy and social disparities lead to the French Revolution?
2. What Enlightenment ideas are reflected in the Declaration of the Rights of Man?
3. How do the causes, characteristics, and consequences of the American and French Revolutions compare?
4. What are the principle ideas found in the major political documents formulated during the American and French Revolutions? (Declaration of Indpendence, U.S. Constitution, and Declaration of the Rights of Man)
5. To what extent was the French Revolution a success?

Vocabulary

TABLE 1.1:

balance of power	A political situation in which no one nation is powerful enough to pose a threat to others.
Bonaparte, Napoleon	A French military and political leader who rose to prominence during the latter stages of the French Revolution and eventually crowned Emperor in 1804. His legal reform, the Napoleonic Code, has been a major influence on civil law worldwide. He is regarded as one of the greatest military commanders of all time for his role in the wars led against France by a series of coalitions, the so-called Napoleonic Wars. Before his final defeat in 1815, he had taken control of most of continental Europe, seeking to expand the French empire spread the ideals of the French Revolution.

TABLE 1.1: (continued)

Committee of Public Safety	A committee lead by Robespierre during the French Revolution that was responsible for identifying those considered enemies of the revolution and bringing them to "justice." It became an important tool used by Robespierre to maintain political power during the Reign of Terror.
Congress of Vienna	A series of meetings in 1814-1815 during which European leaders sought to establish long-lasting peace and security after the defeat of Napoleon by returning overthrown monarchs to their thrones and establishing a European balance of power.
Declaration of the Rights of Man	A statement of Revolutionary ideals adopted by France's National Assembly in 1789 during the early days of the French Revolution. In maintained that "all men are born free and equal in rights."
Estates General	An assembly of representative from all three of the estates, or social classes, in pre-revolutionary France.
French Revolution	The political, social, and military turmoil experienced in France between 1789 and 1799 that led to the overthrow of the monarchy, ended hereditary privilege, and made France more democratic.
"liberty, equality, fraternity"	The common slogan of the French Revolution, based upon the ideals expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.
Louis XVI	The French king who, after being tried and found guilty of treason during the radical Jacobin phase of the Revolution, was put to death by the guillotine during the French Revolution.
National Assembly	A French congress established by representative of the Third Estate in 1789 during the French Revolution to enact laws and reforms in the name of the French people.
nationalism	The belief that peoples' main loyalty should be to their nation and to the people whom they share a common culture and history, rather than to a king or queen.
Reign of Terror	A period of time during the French Revolution when Maximilien Robespierre ruled France nearly as a dictator and thousands of political figures and ordinary citizens were executed, the guillotine being a common method of execution.
Robespierre, Maximilien	A radical Jacobin leader during the French Revolution. He came to dominate the Committee of Public Safety during the Reign of Terror. His abuse of power eventually led to his downfall; he was overthrown in 1794 and executed during the Thermidorian Reaction.

TABLE 1.1: (continued)

Storming of the Bastille	An important symbolic event taking place in the early days of the French Revolution in which ordinary citizens stormed and took control of the Bastille, a Paris prison used to contain political prisoners, in an attempt to obtain the gunpowder contained there. The date of the event, July 14, would eventually be enshrined as a French national holiday, similar to the 4th of July celebrated in the U.S.

Internet Resources

- French Revolution (Part 1) by Khan Academy
- French Revolution (Part 2) by Khan Academy

References

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